

Mary Bono

1961–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE
REPUBLICAN FROM CALIFORNIA

1998–



Image courtesy of the Member

THOUGH SHE NEVER HELD ANY ELECTIVE OFFICE PRIOR to winning election to the House, and arrived amidst a presidential impeachment scandal, Mary Bono made the transition from the wife of a celebrity-turned-Member-of-Congress to a Representative in her own right.

Mary Whitaker was born in Cleveland, Ohio, on October 24, 1961, one of four children raised by Clay and Karen Whitaker. In 1984, she earned a B.F.A. in art history from the University of Southern California. In February 1986, she married the entertainer Sonny Bono and eventually raised two children with him, Chesare and Chianna. From 1988 to 1992, Mary Bono served as the first lady of Palm Springs, California, while her husband was mayor. In 1994, Sonny Bono was elected to the U.S. House as a Republican in a district encompassing the city of Palm Springs.

On January 5, 1998, Sonny Bono died in a skiing accident in South Lake Tahoe, California. Mary Bono entered and won the April 7 special election to fill her husband's seat by defeating Democratic candidate, actor Ralph Waite, with 65 percent of the vote. For the remainder of the 105th Congress (1997–1999), she served on the Judiciary and National Security committees. In November 1998, Bono again defeated Waite, this time with 60 percent of the vote, for the full term in the 106th Congress (1999–2001). In 2000, she compiled a similar re-election victory against Democrat Ron Oden.¹

While initially filling some of her husband's committee assignments, Representative Bono eventually relinquished them as she developed her own legislative interests. In the 106th Congress, she held her Judiciary assignment and received a seat on both the Armed Services and Small Business committees. But in the 107th Congress (2001–2003), Bono gave up her other assignments to join the Energy and Commerce Committee and three of its subcommittees: Commerce, Trade, and Consumer Protection; Energy and Air Quality; and Environment and Hazardous Materials. In the 109th Congress (2005–2007), she was appointed to the Health Subcommittee.

Following the precedent set by many prior congressional widows, Bono's term in the 105th Congress was, in part, a memorial to her late husband.² She generally supported Sonny Bono's legislative positions as an advocate for decentralized government authority and greater local control, particularly in the field of education. A critic of the existing tax structure, she favored tax reform and a reduction in the size of the federal bureaucracy. She continued Sonny Bono's work to enact stricter environmental regulations to preserve the Salton Sea, a southern California lake, half of which lies in her district. In late 1998, Congresswoman Bono and other California Representatives convinced the House to fund an environmental study and begin the process of cleaning the Salton Sea. Mary Bono also directed through the House a copyright extension bill which had been introduced by her husband.

The biggest vote of Representative Bono's first term came with her assignment on the House Judiciary Committee, which had opened impeachment proceedings against President William J. Clinton. As the committee's most junior member, she began by often yielding her time for questions to other members. But by the end of the process she had largely won favorable reviews with her thoughtful examination of witnesses. Bono supported bringing an impeachment motion to the House Floor and, along with the Republican majority, later voted to impeach President Clinton.

Representative Bono also carved out her own legislative interests—different from her husband's. In 2000, she helped pass legislation establishing the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto National Monument in her district. She also cosponsored legislation to bar national forests from charging fees to recreational users. "To tax the great outdoors is offensive to the concept of the national forest system," Bono said.³ On trade and labor, she disagreed with her husband, who supported "fast-track" legislation to ease trade restrictions, believing such a policy could hurt agricultural workers in her district. Representative Bono authored successful legislation requiring country-of-origin labeling for fresh fruits and vegetables.⁴ She also differentiated herself from fellow Republicans on the contentious abortion issue. While supporting parental notification and opposing federal funding for abortions and partial-birth abortions, Bono said, "But in the end, it's between a woman, her family and her God. It's a moral decision, and she has to make it on her own. The federal government does not belong in it."⁵

After several terms in Congress, Representative Bono had established herself as an up-and-coming figure within the party, one who could appeal to the "soccer mom" demographic. Bono won re-election to the House in 2002, defeating Democrat Elle Kurpiewski with 65 percent of the vote. In 2004, Bono earned a fifth term in Congress by defeating Democrat Richard Meyer, 66 to 34 percent.⁶

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, "Mary Bono,"
<http://bioguide.congress.gov>

NOTES

- 1 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,"
<http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/elections.html>.
- 2 Lorraine Adams, "Keepers of the Flame," 1 November 1998, *Good Housekeeping* 227 (no. 5): 136;
Jeanne Marie Laskas, "Oh, My God, We're Not Blond Anymore: The Transformation of Mary Bono," 1 July 1999, *Esquire* 132 (no. 1): 122.
- 3 *Politics in America*, 2002
(Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2001): 148–149.
- 4 "Official Biography of Mary Bono," <http://www.house.gov/bono/bio.html> (accessed 15 February 2005).
- 5 Frank Bruni, "The Widow's Run," 29 March 1998, *New York Times Magazine*: 34.
- 6 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,"
<http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/elections.html>.